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A

DISCOURSE

OCCASIONED BY

THE BOSTON FUGITIVE SLAVE CASE,

DELIVERED IN THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH,

PHILADELPHIA, APRIL 13, 1851.

BY

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DISCOURSE.

JOHN VIII., XXXII.

“THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE.”

Man proposes, God disposes. It is so hard to speak to unsympathizing hearers, knowing that many, if not most, of those who listen to you, regard you, even in their charity, as the victim of a blind and narrow zeal, that, as I have most earnestly desired, so had I deliberately proposed to myself, to do my utmost to avoid for awhile all allusion to that subject, which never can be alluded to in public or in private, without producing an excitement, which, however inevitable, and salutary in the end, must needs be painful to every lover of peace and quiet.

So I say, I had proposed; but God disposes. And events have just occurred in his Providence, so momentous in their import, involving so directly our dearest rights and our most sacred interests, appealing so speakingly to our sense of all that is just, humane and Christian, that, no matter what, in my weakness, I proposed, even if I had made a solemn vow before God to keep silent, that vow must have been broken utterly, for it could have been kept only at the cost, not only of every quality that entitles me for a sin-

gle instant to your attention, but of every attribute of freedom and humanity. Seeing as I do, as clearly as I see the light, that misrepresented, sneered at, denounced as it may be, the conflict which is going on between Freedom and Slavery, another melancholy scene of which we have just witnessed, is the cardinal interest of mankind, the great central subject of the world's history, the holy, religious struggle of the God-inspired soul of man wrestling for salvation, aspiring to break the chains of evil and to ascend to God and to Heaven; seeing this, knowing it to be so, as certainly as I know my right hand from my left, if I could hold my peace, if I could refrain from imploring you this day, by all that is dear to you, to pause and consider, there is no slave on a Southern plantation more abjectly a slave than I should be. So there is no help for it. I must speak; and my inmost heart kneels before you now, and supplicates you for a patient and candid hearing.

And yet, my friends, I cannot preach to you now a regularly arranged discourse; the thoughts and emotions that have crowded upon me the past week, with every day's tidings, render me incapable of that. Let me suggest a few simple considerations.

And in the first place, I put it to you as wise, thoughtful and serious men: Is it not evident—is there any possible way by which we can deny or disguise the fact, that the great question that convulses the land, that calls out the armed array of the Government, implicates the central principles of Christianity? Not only are our civil and political relations involved, but our Christian profession and character, our personal honor and salvation; and we are

driven into a predicament which puts our immortal souls in the most deadly peril.

God knows I have no desire to meddle with the affairs of Government. I am ready to submit, and I hold it my bounden duty to submit to all its ordinances. That is, if it commands me either to hunt my brother man and to let him be hunted and enslaved without remonstrance on my part, or to pay a fine and be imprisoned, I submit so far as to accept the latter alternative. I am ready to be fined and imprisoned, to suffer without forcible resistance whatever it may please the Government to inflict; but, as I hope to be saved, as I believe in God and in Christ, I cannot disown the obligations of religion and humanity, even by my silence, nor permit others to do so, if my influence can prevent it, nor will I, as God is my helper. I put the case in the first person; but what is my case, is yours, the case of every one of us; and it is just this, and it cannot be kept out of sight, every child may see it—it is just this: We are forbidden by men to do what the plainest dictates of our hearts, what Christ himself has commanded with all the explicitness of which language is capable, and with all the mighty emphasis of his life and his death; and we cannot obey this impious Fugitive Slave Law, without disobeying God.

It is true, not one in thousands, not one of us here present, may ever be called upon to take a direct, personal part in the execution of this iniquity. Still the question does come home to every one of us, and it is a question which involves our personal honor, and concerns us as just, humane, Christian men, whether we will bear witness, to the utmost extent of our influence, to the unchristian character

of this enactment, whether we will deprave our understandings and our hearts by excusing and justifying it, whether we will acquiesce in it by our silence, or whether we will do all that in us lies as men and Christians, to manifest our abhorrence of it, and to make it hateful in the estimation of all men.

My hearers, the existence of this law, abrogating as it does the law of humanity and of Christ, is a fountain of deadly poison in our midst, blinding our understandings, hardening our hearts, searing our consciences, falsifying all our religious professions, and perilling the salvation of our souls. Unless we ignore our manhood, renounce forever our reason and our humanity, we must perceive now that we cannot remain neutral. We cannot be indifferent, without being indifferent to everything that is manly, just and Christian. Here, in and through the Fugitive Slave, Christ speaks to us, and God. Eternal Justice, that Truth which is from everlasting to everlasting, which no one questions, whatever else may be disputed, addresses us, and commands us to do for our wronged brother as we would have him do for us, were we in his place. We are commanded to regard him as if it were Christ himself who claimed our sympathy and our aid. In the Providence of Heaven, here is the grand test of our religious soundness, of our Christian integrity; if we evade this test, our religion is worthless, and though we may still say that we love God and may still worship God, and profess to serve Him with a thousand offerings of praise and prayer and active charity, yet if we hate our brother, or, which is the same thing, neglect him as if we hated him, we are liars in the sight of God, and all our professions are

in vain. We are yet in our sins, impenitent and unredeemed.

It is wholly out of my power to see this subject save as it is identified with the cause of Christ and with the salvation of the soul, that cause for which we here assemble. The specific object aimed at by those who bear the odious name of Abolitionists, is a glorious object, the emancipation of millions of slaves. It is worth all the agitation and trouble it will cost. But for my own part, I lose sight of the end and aim of the great effort, in the religious character and redeeming influence of the effort itself. We cannot labor for others without doing an unspeakable good to ourselves. We cannot refuse to do good to others without doing the greatest injury to ourselves. By laboring for others or refusing to labor for them, our own souls are saved, or they are lost. Would to heaven I could make you see how true this is! As God is my witness, my heart's sole desire and purpose is to show you, if I may, the way of life and salvation. In and through the cause of the Fugitive and the Slave, those principles of truth are revealed, which are the springs of all life to individuals and to nations, and to the whole universe of God. In this Cause, you may come to learn the divine quality, the unspeakable blessedness of Truth, as you never learned it before, as you never can learn it in any other way. What you have to do for the Cause is to commit yourself to it irretrievably. Give it to be known that you are ready to submit to any penalties that the law can inflict, but that you will never obey a law which can be obeyed only by disobeying God. Do all that you can to swell the numbers of those who take this ground, until they are so numerous that there will be none

left to execute inhuman and wicked laws, or the officials of the Government will be ready to renounce their places, however lucrative, and confront loss and poverty, rather than carry such laws out.

That such a state of things may be brought about, and will be brought about in time, if there is a single man in the nation who is faithful to the Right, is by no means an impossible dream. All things, even the most adverse, will help to realize it.

It is a dark hour now, it is true, for Freedom, for Justice, and for Mercy; now when the ancient and honored Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the mother of States, has bowed down her head to do the bidding of the Slave-power, and turned her sacred soil, like our own, into a hunting-ground, where human flesh is the game. Let her hang her monuments of the Revolution in black, now when Faneuil Hall has been closed against the peaceable assembling of men, than whom there are none more upright, more accomplished and more honorable in the land; now when her Courts of law have been encompassed in chains, now when the waters of Boston Harbor, into which she flung the tea that bore witness to her violated rights, have been traversed by a vessel bearing away to the South the tribute of human flesh, which she is so eager to pay for her trade; yes, her sons and lovers may well lie prostrate in sackcloth and ashes, for there were Massachusetts men once who could detect oppression in a bale of goods, or a bit of stamped paper; there were Boston merchants once who were proud to hazard their princely fortunes for God and Liberty; but now her people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; for when

their liberties are struck down in the person of a living brother man, created in the awful image of the invisible God, because his complexion is dark, and their trade is in peril, they cannot feel, they cannot hear, they cannot see. It is a gloomy time indeed.

Nevertheless, as I believe in God, I believe that in the darkness, His hand is scattering far and wide, in the hearts of the people, the seed that shall rise and bring forth fruit for the healing of the whole nation. The events of the past week, dark and melancholy as they are, have nevertheless laid bare the depraving and despotic character of Slavery. They have shown how it insists upon the violation and the sacrifice of the simplest principles of Justice, how it clamors to compel freemen to do the meanest work of slaves, threatening at one time, bribing them at another. Think you, these events will not add fuel to the flame which has been kindled on the sacred altar of Liberty, and which burns already with such formidable brightness? Will they not deepen the convictions and animate the ardor of those who deem themselves laboring in the holiest of causes for the most sacred of ends? I know the men who are at the head of this glorious movement; I know that, however grossly they may be misrepresented to the nation, they abound in all the gifts and graces which distinguish honorable, Christian men. I know that they are fixed and invincible in their persuasion of the supremacy of simple Truth, in their faith in pure moral power, and that in every act of the enemies of Freedom they will find new materials to advance her interests and to extend and deepen among the people the faith and the principles to which their own lives are consecrated.

Assured that these things are so, that every outrage upon human rights will only hasten the day of their triumph, let every man, I repeat, commit himself, without calculation of consequences, without hesitation, to the cause of God and man, until all bad laws and unjust institutions become a dead letter, and, deprived of all human support, fall of themselves to the ground. Every man who is true becomes a living epistle of the Truth, correcting misrepresentation, exposing error, diffusing Truth. Truth shall make us free; not by brute violence, not by the exertion of force, but by dissipating prejudice, by showing things as they are,—thus shall the chains of the slave, and the rod of the oppressor be broken.

There was one circumstance in the history of the past week, which must have told—how is it possible that it should not?—on thousands of hearts in Massachusetts, like the warning voice of an angel out of Heaven; and that was the occurrence, in the midst of those despotic proceedings, of that time-honored observance, the State Fast, an observance of equal antiquity with Thanksgiving Day. While the capital of the State was holding a man in bonds, there came the Fast, and with it came there not the awful voice of the ancient prophet: “Is not this the Fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to bring the poor that are cast out to thy house, and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?” But we are afraid so much as to speak for the deliverance of the oppressed; we are afraid to let the fugitive go free, and we hide ourselves from our own flesh, lest disunion and civil war come upon us. But mark

what God promised by the mouth of his holy prophet. If thou let the oppressed go free, if thou discharge the simple offices of humanity, "then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily, and the Lord shall guide thee continually and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones; and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters fail not." Were there none, think you, to whom these words occurred on that Fast day? If they were forgotten, the very Bibles in the houses must have cried out.

There is another thing which may well arrest attention, and in which, if we have eyes to see, we may recognize the mighty hand of God, the working of his Spirit, the Spirit of Truth; and it is this: the sentiment that has been awakened and increasing for some years past, throughout the North, against the unholy claim of property in man, has been awakened and increased, not by the will of man, but against the will of man. It evidently has a higher, or a deeper, origin than the human will. Men have not chosen the cause of Freedom, but the cause of Freedom has chosen them, and compelled them, in a manner, to do its work. They have struggled against it; they have tried to put it down by violence; they have ridiculed and laughed at it; they have assailed it with all manner of misrepresentation; or they have stood aloof from it and tried to evade it altogether. Still it is growing, not with the aid of the public or private mind, but in opposition to popular opinion.

O Liberty, thy banner, torn, but flying.

Streams like a thunder-storm *against* the wind.

And now the holy cause numbers among its friends and

cadres a steady and continually increasing company of men of culture, of social standing, and of independent condition. And if, as is stated, some fifteen hundred men, in Boston, have enrolled themselves in support of law and order, law and order supported by the violation of human rights in the person of the fugitive, it ought to be known also, on the other hand, that the Vigilance Committee of the same city, who seek to aid and protect the fugitive, and to guard human rights assaulted in him, is also numbering its hundreds, comprising men of education and of wealth, ceaselessly on the watch to devise ways and means for the protection of those whom the law disowns.

It would be well, if the advocates of oppression would consider these things. They will see—they cannot much longer help seeing—that the enemies of tyranny and injustice are not moved by sectional prejudices, or the wilfulness of an ignorant fanaticism, but by a sacred law of God which could not be forever winked out of sight, which has insisted upon being recognised, a law which man, universally, was created to recognise and obey, and which, with his will or against his will, he must serve. When the South sees this thing as it is, it will see that it is fighting, not against ignorant or obstinate men, but against the omnipotent will of God; and in submitting thereto, it will find its honor and its triumph.

As surely as the sun rises, the great principle of human Freedom which is now only dawning over the North, will rise and shed abroad its light, and become invested with the majesty and power of a great public sentiment; and then the darkness of error and oppression will vanish away like mist before it. Whether the South acknowledges or

not, that this movement is the inspiration of the holy spirit of God, it is felt by its advocates at the North to be a profoundly religious movement. So was it regarded by Dr. Channing. He considered it, as he said, as "the only practical manifestation of Christianity in these days;" and so is it considered by increasing numbers, as identical with the cause of Human Progress, of true Religion, as the great means of Divine Grace in the sanctification of individual and national character, exceeding in its influence all existing religious institutions. It is the Christianity, the Religion of our times. The Church, which claims to be the special repository of religious truth and religious life, stands generally in opposition to it or aloof from it. Most unhappily for the Church. She can save herself in the respect and confidence of men only by making haste to adopt as her own, the cause of the friendless and oppressed, for whom the great Head of the Church suffered on the cross.

While I thus claim for the Anti-Slavery movement, a character thoroughly Christian and religious, I doubt not that its friends may, in the ardor of their love of liberty, be betrayed, at times, into expressions ill befitting a religious cause. Oppression will sometimes drive the wisest men mad, but it is a sacred madness; and for one, I should be ashamed of myself, if I could not, with an illustrious British Statesman, pardon something to the spirit of Liberty. One may well distrust the soundness and singleness of his own heart, when he finds himself picking flaws and magnifying the small imperfections of those who are engaged in a great and noble work, and cannot always be stopping to measure their words. There will be defects in all human working. And besides, before we criticise and condemn, we shall do

well to be sure that we are not the dupes of the blindest prejudices, and the grossest misrepresentation. There is no end to the falsehood and error that abound when prejudice and passion are excited. Then men stickle at no means, however unworthy, to suppress or pervert what they do not like.

I submit one thing more to your consideration. It is said that if this inhuman Law is not enforced, Disunion will be the result. The South threatens it. Whether the South be serious in such an absurdity, may be a question. But if the South be serious—what is implied? When she says, ‘Return our fugitives or we will secede,’ does not the South virtually declare that the essential value of the Union to her, consists in the protection which it affords to her slave property? She wants us—it appears we are necessary to her—only as her slave hunters and slave drivers. And are these offices, I will not say for Christians, but for men? If upon these terms we maintain the Union, what, in the name of all that is honorable, is the Union to us, a Union by which one party is to possess slaves, and the other to stand guard over them, and hunt them as occasion may require? To be sure they will pay us in trade, and we may grow rich, but what is all this wealth by which we buy only shame? It may gild but it cannot hide our chains. It cannot ransom our lost honor. We are nothing but slave drivers after all, every man of us. Are we ready to make up our mind to occupy so pitiable a position? If we do, we must first forget our fathers. We must disown our Christianity utterly. We must deny our God. But we must not, we will not, we cannot, do any of these things. There is too much light, too much humanity among us still,

to permit it. We have hearts of flesh yet in our bosoms. We are not stocks and stones. We are men, human beings, and we cannot submit to such an indignity. No. Let us be faithful then to the memories of the past, to the Religion which we uphold, to the God whom we come hither to worship. Let us resolve to be free and to make free, by all the rightful means within our reach. So only, by a living manifestation of Freedom, can we win all of good in the Southern heart—and the good is there—to a like resolve. Then they who hold their brethren in bondage, shall be touched to the quick by the peerless beauty of Freedom, and inspired with an earnest purpose to break the chains of their bondmen. In that work they may be sure of our hearty and fraternal co-operation. In that work of God we will be theirs forever !

[Since the above was in type, it is understood that the Boston city authorities have refused Faneuil Hall to Mr. Webster's friends. For consistency's sake, we suppose. But what a confession of want of faith in free speech in general, and in Mr. Webster in particular ! There was a time when the people of Boston considered that gentleman abundantly able to make good any position he might take, to the annihilation of all opponents.]